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SIPDIS

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SUBJECT: AVIAN FLU OUTBREAK DOES NOT POSE SIGNIFICANT RISK TO HUMANS

1. SUMMARY: The H9N2 strain of avian flu virus detected in the northern governorates does not pose a significant health risk to humans. The GOI is responding and developing response and prevention plans. An Embassy task force is following the situation and assisting the GOI as necessary and appropriate. END SUMMARY.

2. On October 11, Kurdish farmers in Irbil and Sulaymaniyah notified local government officials of several thousand poultry deaths. Kurdish officials requested USG assistance to investigate. On October 13, a virology-veterinary expert from the Naval Medical Research Unit (NAMRU) in Cairo, which serves as the World Health Organization (WHO) Regional Reference Laboratory, took samples from six birds on one farm in Irbil. The test results indicated that the birds were infected with the H9N2 strain of avian influenza. The NAMRU test results agreed with tests done by the Iraqi Ministry of Agriculture (MoA) in February during an earlier outbreak of poultry deaths. The NAMRU test results also correlate with the H9N2 strain detected in eastern Turkey.

3. The GOI is responding to the H9N2 outbreak by:

- Contacting the WHO for assistance with procedures and equipment;
- Prohibiting the importation of chicken products and eggs;
- Conducting a media campaign to educate farmers and the general population;
- Requiring regular reporting of any abnormal bird and poultry situations;
- Prohibiting the hunting, consumption, and transport of migratory birds.

In addition, the Kurdish Ministries of Agriculture and Health have invited the central Baghdad ministries to participate in meetings in Sulaymaniyah to develop further response and prevention plans for the Kurdish governorates. The Kurdish governorates also are doing further testing of poultry farms to determine the extent of infection. The Ministries of Agriculture and Health in Baghdad are standing up a working group to develop unified, Iraq-wide response and prevention plans.

4. An Embassy task force -- led by IRMO and including the Health Attache, MNF-I, USDA, USAID, Public Affairs, and ECON -- is following the avian flu situation and assisting the GOI as necessary and appropriate.